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The Role of Objects: Creating Meaning in Situations*

The present volume comprises papers presented at a conference of the ERC Advanced Grant ‘Lived Ancient Religion: Questioning “cults” and “polis religion”’ project held at *Haus Hainstein* in Eisenach (Germany) from 9 to 11 October 2013.¹ It is dedicated to Professor Richard Gordon on the occasion of his 70th birthday.² The idea for the conference was born from the ERC research project headed by Rubina Raja and Jörg Rüpke and based at the Max Weber Centre of Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at Erfurt University. This collective research project takes a new approach to the religious history of Mediterranean antiquity, starting from the individual and ‘lived’ religion instead of cities or peoples. ‘Lived religion’ suggests a set of experiences, practices addressed to, and conceptions of the divine, which are appropriated, expressed, and shared by individuals in diverse social spaces³ from the primary space of the family to the shared space of public institutions and trans-local literary communication. The methodological innovation is defined through the combination of the notions of religious experience, embodiment, and ‘culture in interaction’. Such a perspective gives us the opportunity to examine religion from the perspective of individuals and groups as a lived experience and not as the carrying-out of a set of rules and regulations to be fulfilled.

From the ‘lived religion’ perspective, the role of religion as mediating any globalisation of thought is particularly intriguing. The concept of religion is one which continues to fascinate us, no less in this day and age, where

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2 See also <http://www.hsozkult.de/hfn/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-5087>; accessed on 11 January 2015.

3 McGuire 2008; Rüpke 2011.

regions and people are so closely connected through technology and the ability of fast travel. Nonetheless people, their cultures and religions, differ significantly both intra- and interregionally. Whereas such differences may become more apparent when comparisons are easier to make due to the state of information technology, much effort is necessary to describe and understand religious behaviour and to fully grasp the range of possible individual and group appropriations of traditions.

Objects used routinely or occasionally for religious purposes, for example, are not self-explanatory and this is where archaeology and religious studies meet and where research within these fields is fruitfully combined.⁴ Certainly in Western culture there has been a focus on belief over practice and in particular on the ways in which belief has been expressed textually (e.g. Weiss 2015). The centrality of analysis, discourse and reflection on and in texts can and should of course not be denied. Texts form the basis and also the most direct insight into formation processes. However, the focus on texts has led to an under-appreciation of the material dimension of religious practices and beliefs. Nonetheless it is perhaps most crucially the local, situational, and individual dimension of religion which has been largely overlooked.⁵ Such considerations have begun to be addressed within archaeology and ancient history in recent years, bringing to light new perspectives of viewing both archaeological material and literary sources.⁶

The new perspective taken within the Lived Ancient Religion project not only takes up these approaches, but combines them with regard to lived experience. This angle is crucial to create new ways of understanding religion in antiquity, against the traditional focus of ancient Mediterranean religion in terms of public religion, i.e., consisting of the religions of political units (usually city-states) which are part and parcel of civic identity. Viewing religion as an instrument through which institutions could steer and control groups and individuals has certainly brought much valuable information about the construction of institutionalised religion. Such analyses of ancient polytheistic religions, whether they refer to ‘embedded’ religion⁷ or ‘polis religion’⁸, work on the assumption that all members of ancient societies were in principle equally religious. This basic assumption of a *homo religiosus* is bound up with the political interpretation of ancient religion: since religion is an unquestioned given, it is thought to be particularly well-suited to cul-

4 Raja and Rüpke 2015.

5 Culley 2008, 67–70; Raja and Rüpke 2015.

6 Kaizer 2009; Blömer, Lichtenberger and Raja 2015; Raja forthcoming a.

7 Beard, North and Price 1998.

8 Sourvinou-Inwood 2002a/b.

tivate 'collective identities' and to act as instrument for the justification of power. Such a view necessarily streamlines ways of viewing religion, favouring institutionalised religion and therefore, for obvious reasons, not leaving much space for the experience of the single participant and/or agent, being rather a hinderance to seeing religion on the individual and group levels as an experience or set of experiences, which is mediated in everyday life according to context and situation.

'Embedded religion', 'cults' and 'polis religion', therefore, leave a gap by failing to take into account the variety of individual expressions and the importance of situational constructs in lived ancient religion in both primary and secondary spaces. The conference, consequently, focussed on the individual *and* the situational, i. e., on the intrinsic determinants of 'lived religion', and on methodological issues concerned with the concept of 'Lived Ancient Religion', thereby shifting the focus towards the experience of individuals and groups.

The study of bygone cultures necessarily depends on archaeology which includes textual as well as iconographic, epigraphic and material evidence. While literature on the role of objects is abundant, the Objects conference took a new angle by discussing the meanings of objects in very specific, regular, but also fluctuating, situations.⁹ This shift of perspective proved vital. Not only did objects constitute the primary material creating a physical and visual framework, in and around which religious life unfolded in antiquity, but, more importantly, objects were made, handled and experienced by a range of individuals and groups. Any such objects inherently had a variety of meanings depending on the person(s) handling them and/or according to the situations and spaces in which they played a part. One key issue in this respect is the question of how the meaning of objects was appropriated by individual and collective agents. In other words, a crucial factor is how objects were used and perceived, and how they created different meanings in different situations not only in public rituals, but also in more or less exclusive settings and at home.

Objects, large or small, can themselves provide extensive information when contextualised within their environments. These environments include several different settings – multiple situations – which can create multiple meanings according to the stage in a certain process or the perspective of the individual or group. Central to the discussion of object-human interrelations are the works of Bruno Latour, who, with the unfolding of his actor-network theory, has played a crucial role in forcing us to

9 E. g. Hicks 2010; Houtman and Meyer 2012 both with references.

regard the ‘lives of objects’ in a much more nuanced light.¹⁰ However, one must also come back to the work of Michel Foucault who alerted us to the entangled nature of objects, words (language) and human perception.¹¹ He states a ‘loosening of the embrace, apparently so tight, of words and things, and the emergence of a group of rules proper to discursive practice. These rules define not the dumb existence of a reality, nor the canonical use of a vocabulary, but the ordering of objects. “Words and things” is the entirely serious title of a problem; it is the ironic title of a work that modifies its own form, displaces its own data, and reveals, at the end of the day, a quite different task. A task that consists of not – of no longer treating discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.’¹² Foucault clearly shows how objects can be and are embodied with meaning through language and action. ‘Meaning’ could therefore be central and crucial. However, it might also have been subordinate and even unimportant as the papers of Hallie Meredith, Alison Cooley and Ioanna Patera show in the present volume. The concept of ‘knowledge’, however, is what takes a focal stand in understanding the relationship between objects, language and humans.

Archaeological find spots sometimes only randomly tell us about the place in which the object was intentionally or unintentionally deposited, lost or left behind. Find spots might not reveal anything about use or meaning. Nevertheless, attention to such situations is crucial to the understanding of the complexities involved in analysing the meaning of objects. Considerations also as to whether an object was used only once or repeatedly, in which ways and by whom, and whether it was used in a variety of situations – possibly even by different people – are important to the understanding of an object. Objects must hence always be ‘situated’ and contextualised within a range of possible situations,¹³ and their history and relationships and associations thus created.¹⁴

Similarly, the iconography of objects informs us about the intentional imagery, symbols or writing situated on objects. However, iconography was not necessarily always related directly to function, meaning that function

¹⁰ Latour 2005.

¹¹ Foucault 1969.

¹² Foucault 1969, 49.

¹³ Raja 2015, Weiss forthcoming.

¹⁴ Latour 2005 and recently 2014 (accessed 5th February 2015: <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/137-YALE-TANNER.pdf>) as well as Hodder 2012 are crucial contributions to the understanding of actor, object and agency theories as well as the complex relationships between human and things.

cannot always be derived through iconographic analysis alone. Nonetheless, iconography might provide insights about the choices an agent (either craftsman or client/purchaser) made with regard to the object and its representation. But the perception of the viewer might not always have corresponded with the intention of the producer. Issues such as these must be considered when handling objects and their meanings and are included in the contributions to this volume.

Scholars studying modern societies have accepted the fact that any study of everyday religion must consider 'the spatiality of religion' or 'lived space',¹⁵ and most archaeologists and historians do realize that religion is not just repetition of a given set of rules, which can be traced in historical developments. Yet further awareness, taking the material from the level of empirical analysis and interpretation one step further to include a meta-interpretation of the material, is crucial, allowing a wider view which takes the 'situational' well into account.¹⁶ People do usually not just do what they are being told, but creatively negotiate their daily concerns through practice.¹⁷ We may also assume that this was the case in pre-modern societies, although it is more allusive to grasp these practices. The difficulties of making it archaeologically tangible how people actually lived religion in domestic and public spaces, should not lead us to refrain from attempts to analyse their religious practices – that is, individual and group appropriations, and not just the basic and obvious differences between 'cults'. We hope that this volume presents ways of rethinking how objects may be approached from different angles and be discussed within their multiple situations and meanings.

Shifting between mortuary and daily life spheres, Patricia McAnany in her oral contribution to the conference, which could not be presented in the volume, brought an important comparative perspective to the conference, by dealing with material from Mesoamerica. Her contribution showed that objects – sometimes primary, sometimes secondary – buried in domestic spaces provided a material focus for memory communities and also a place where influential deceased could be conjured up in Mesoamerica. She illustrated that there existed a shared belief in the agency or communicative efficacy of objects especially in relations between the living and remains of the dead. This might be considered an area in which biological death did not translate directly to social death or importance in the social construction of

¹⁵ E.g. Bergmann 2008; Soja 2000.

¹⁶ Contra, for example, Insoll 2004; 2011; Kyriakidis 2007; Renfrew 1985; Renfrew and Zubrow 1994.

¹⁷ E.g. Shove et al. 2011; McDarnell 1995.

the living society. Her considerations added important additional insight to the conference.

The conference aimed at avoiding the tendency to take for granted the importance of objects in any given situation. Could objects sometimes be devoid of meaning? Could they be out of 'situations'? Exploring such ideas, Ioanna Patera demonstrates a certain elusiveness of objects. Against previous interpretations of the presence of objects in ritual contexts by means of substitution, she shows that substitutes were much less frequently used than we usually assume. In fact, the concept of substitution appears to be part of a modern theory, rather than part of the ancient system explaining the various representations of things and humans. For example, the analysis of the use of objects in Greek mysteries or the *anthesteria* reveals a distinct vagueness of Greek terminology. Other examples are the rather unclear nature of objects like the Roman *equus October* or the many 'stones' (*Iuppiter lapis*, *lapis manalis*, *Cybele*) known from religious ritual practices. This elusiveness could be deliberate, for example, emphasising that divine images cannot be rendered by human beings. In this respect, the antique discourse on idolatry is particularly relevant.¹⁸ At the same time, however, the elusiveness of objects in texts might have allowed for diverse (individual and/or collective) interpretations, depending on agent and situation. Patera's paper hence shows how not only ancient, but also contemporary discourses influence our interpretation of the essence of an object and its various meanings.

The meaning of other objects as being religious seems clearer from the fact that they were created to serve a specific religious purpose or to give allusions to religious situations. As such, their *materiality* was the carrier medium of the religious symbolism which continuously formed and reformed the implicit religious meaning. The material of a given religious object should therefore not be considered as arbitrary, but as a vital part of the symbol itself and could carry symbolic meaning. The subsequent question is then whether and how the material value might have influenced the value of the symbol?¹⁹ Andreas Kropp studies an almost entirely ignored type of Near Eastern Tyches, the so-called Tyche of Berytus, a motif which appears on mass-produced coinage.²⁰ Starting from an iconology-based analysis and interpretation of the iconography of the body type, dress and attributes, Kropp reveals that the origins of the type are rooted in local traditions. This is in part also done by his consideration of the audience, viewers

¹⁸ See Gaifman 2012 for an important contribution which, although focussing on the Greek period, hold true also for the Roman imperial period.

¹⁹ E.g. Bosch 2010.

²⁰ Also see Kropp 2011 for a first tackling of important parts of the material.

or receivers of this Tyche type, i. e., the local population. Kropp challenges the idea of a generic image of Tyche, which in fact gains specific significance when contextualized within the interplay of an artist's creative use of disparate elements on the one hand, and the viewers' expectations and responses on the other. It is within this *Spannungsfeld* that the meaning is created, shaped and continuously reformulated, and underlining how important situational contextualisation is in this case.

Letters to the Other World attempt to inflict harm – from the agent's point of view invariably justified harm – upon a third party or parties. We call such letters 'curse-tablets', the Greeks called them *katadesmoi*, 'bindings down'; the Romans *defixiones*, 'nailings down'. Such documents, often written on lead, reflect the distress experienced by individuals beyond any institutionalised mode of action; yet patterns can be made out; recourse to cursing by individuals, as opposed to public institutions, needed to draw on existing institutions and suggestive metaphors. As Richard Gordon shows in his paper, however, these documents should not merely be viewed as records, but as individual messages that were appropriated according to individual needs and thereby objectified. Put differently, their materiality was vital for the success of certain practices; the *defixiones* should hence be treated as religious objects. For example, the variety of deictic paragraphism (i. e. writing lines and even individual letters backwards or upside-down, muddling letters, writing in rings) and the way the tablets were treated (e. g. folding or rolling the lead-sheet, or driving one or more nails through the lead) shows the range of possibilities and demonstrates how practices and hence the objectification of a given text were in the focus of a cursing-ritual.

Another aspect is the concept of *choice* and its assumed significance in modern everyday life.²¹ Looking for choice in antiquity, Hallie Meredith shows how individual agents appropriate everyday goods as grave goods and how this practice reflects a socially-constructed meaning. Her study on gold-glass vessels with medallions adorned with text, imagery or a combination thereof shows that these objects were originally personalised gifts, which were subsequently transformed. Having been movable, functional vessels in everyday use, they became immovable medallions as grave goods, buried as grave markers in the catacombs beneath Rome in mid-third to early fourth centuries CE. On another level Meredith demonstrates how individual, synchronic choices were transformed by collective display. This aspect is one of high complexity since the process of transformation from individual to collective initiatives or ways of acting is difficult to pin down.

21 E. g. Paterson 2006; Schrage 2009.

How many individual actions does it take before actions can be considered collective? However, what Meredith clearly shows is that the meaning of objects could change at the point in time in which the object was transferred from one space to another. This, again, opens questions concerning the discourse connecting individual and/or collective religious action in the primary and secondary spaces as mentioned above.

Not only the individual and collective agents, but objects, too, embody meanings defined as exclusively cultural categories, produced in interhuman interaction, but secondarily stored in 'media', which may have been the same or which may have differed in different situations. For example, a receptacle may gain religious significance during religious practices, though being used for 'profane' purposes in other situations. Figurines could absorb the evil forces in healing rituals and were deliberately destroyed at a later point in order to 'pacify' them as agents created through interhuman action.²² They could also be used as images in fertility rituals while representing gods in other situations. Furthermore an image of a god could have served as a focal point of individual devotion for one individual, and as a display of status or knowledge for another. Along these lines, Alison Cooley explores how inscribed objects set up in the sanctuary of Magna Mater at Ostia expressed the multiple meanings of the cult activities that took place there. This particular space on the fringes of Ostia's urban space hosted a variety of religious experiences that involved individuals, groups, the city, and the state. Her contribution shows how inscriptions provide a glimpse of this complex, shifting scene oscillating between personal relationships of worshippers and deity, the involvement of the town's authorities in regulating the cult, and ritualised sacrifices made on behalf of the Roman state. The inscriptions associated with the sanctuary hence offer an unusual case study, as they allow us to trace the multi-layered nature of the religious worship that took place in a single location.

Finally, the meaning of objects might change depending on how they were *perceived and communicated* differently depending on context and situation. Accessibility and knowledge were key factors of this aspect, as shown by Drew Wilburn in his study of the meaning of several ostrich eggs found at Berenike dating to the fifth century CE. Using the archaeological evidence and the finds associated with the eggshells, he demonstrates the intersection of magic and traditional cult practice in Late Antique Egypt. Some of the inscribed signs were related to magical symbols such as the *charaktères*. The eggshells therefore urge us to consider how indecipherable text may have

²² E.g. Waraksa 2009.

been used to replicate unintelligible speech. At the same time, the symbol of the egg may have had multiple meanings, such as creation myths or divination, symbolisms which might not have been perceived and understood by all agents in all situations.

In summary, the articles of this issue show a variety of examples of how one object could create, constitute and express different meanings even in the same situations, depending on the perspective of agent and recipient. Meaning is situational and not constant. Scholars of ancient cultures must consider how it might have changed and how these changes could have created new meanings. This volume demonstrates how objects created 'meanings' in situational constructs and examines the effectiveness of religious instruments both actively and passively, i.e., how they acted and were employed also in order to create, change and enhance meanings. As such, the methodologies explored in this volume provide a lens through which aspects of lived ancient religion can be examined, namely through a variety of sources ranging from textual to archaeological material, and by considering the possible inconsistency of action and thought.

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